

By Mary Abbe, *Star Tribune*

*The National Endowment for the Arts chairman, who cut his teeth with Minneapolis theater impresario Jim Binger, reports on his recent whirlwind tour of the Twin Cities.*

When Broadway producer Rocco Landesman was appointed chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) a year ago, culture mavens had good reason to assume he would lavish attention on theater initiatives.

Besides having earned a doctorate from the Yale School of Drama, Landesman was president for more than 20 years of Jujamcyn Theaters, the Broadway production company founded by Minneapolis businessman Jim Binger. After Binger's death, Landesman bought Jujamcyn, although he is not actively involved while serving in Washington. His Broadway successes include "Angels in America" and "The Producers."

His first year at the NEA confounded expectations, however. Taking a broad view of the arts, he has reached out to other government agencies to develop cross-disciplinary partnerships. The first program hatched on his watch was the Mayors' Institute on City Design, which in July awarded 21 grants totaling \$3 million to urban development projects centered on the arts. In May he lent the NEA's imprimatur to Blue Star Museums, a program through which 800 museums around the country gave free admission to military personnel and their families this summer.

Recently Landesman, 63, visited the Twin Cities at the request of U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., who serves on the committee that oversees NEA appropriations. We caught up with him by phone last week.

Q Why did you come to the Twin Cities and what did you do here?

A The two main reasons are Betty McCollum and the folks at McKnight Foundation. Betty is a passionate advocate for the arts in Congress and we got to look at St. Paul, starting in Lowertown, which is Exhibit No. 1 in how arts can be a force for revitalization of neighborhoods. We started with a roundtable at the Black Dog Cafe, then had lunch at the University Club followed by a discussion at SteppingStone Theatre. Then we crossed into Minneapolis to a reception at Walker Art Center and saw the Sculpture Garden and how that's connected the museum to the city and the community.

The next day began at the McKnight Foundation, which is deeply personal to me because of the Binger family, which started the foundation. ... Then we toured the Guthrie where [director] Joe Dowling is an old friend, and went to the MacPhail Center for Music where [C.E.O.] David O'Fallon is doing work of national significance with children, adult learners and different communities. Next we put on hard hats and went to the Cowles Center for Dance at the old Shubert Theater, a very exciting project.

Then Heid Erdrich took us on a tour of All My Relations gallery for Native American arts on Franklin Avenue; we're going to try to encourage that over the next few years. And then to the Chicago Avenue Fire Arts Center, where they're making jewelry, sculpture, everything -- a great part of our education. We ended with Juxtaposition Arts, where we talked to kids who have really found a calling in the arts.

Q Wow. Sounds like you encountered more culture here in two days than many Minnesotans do in a year.

A Yeah, all this confirmed for me that Minneapolis and St. Paul are leaders in how the arts are affecting and transforming communities.

Q I understand that you're a baseball enthusiast. Did you have time to visit the new Twins stadium or take in a game?

A Alas, the Twins were in Texas when I was there. The stadium is quite artful in its setting, though. You just turn a corner downtown and there it is, tucked into the city. Everyone tells me it's great. That's going to be my next trip.

Q Some people were expecting you to focus more on theater as NEA chairman. Why haven't you?

A I'm fond of saying that at the NEA all the arts are equal except theater. Of course I love theater, but a lot of our initiatives have to do with design because we're talking about the rebuilding and reconception of cities which is to a great extent a design issue.

Q Minneapolis designers and planners are thinking again about better ways to link the city to the Mississippi River with parks, roads and other developments. Have you any advice for them?

A You're way ahead of my hometown, St. Louis, which has a whole riverfront that it needs to develop. It's certainly instructive to stand on the balcony at the Guthrie and look out over the river and that new park next to the theater. And the sculpture garden in front of the Walker. You want to feel that these places are connected to the river and the city.

Q How is the NEA thriving in these times of tight budgets? [Its fiscal year 2010 appropriation was \$167.5 million; it cut its request for next year to \$161.3 million but included a new "Our Town" program that will, if approved, allocate \$5 million for arts-related programming in 35 communities.]

A I think we're doing pretty well. The funding is stable and reliable. The president and Congress are committed to it and I'm feeling pretty good.

Q In recent years the NEA's priority has been to shift federal money to the states and let them distribute it in a grass-roots democratic way. Do you plan to continue that pattern, or do you have some new national programs in mind that will centralize arts policy?

A Forty percent of our funding goes to the states, but to the extent we can coordinate our goals and not have 50 states going off in 50 directions, we're attempting to do that.

Q How does being a Washington political operative compare with producing a Broadway play?

A We're moving much faster than I ever expected and doing things that would take three years to accomplish in the private sector. I expected bureaucratic gridlock, but we're getting real buy-in from other federal agencies. For example, we have a collaborative program with HUD [Housing the Urban Development] that encourages arts organizations to get involved in community development planning.

Q According to your Wikipedia profile, your passions are theater, baseball, horse racing and country music. What have you seen or done recently that you can recommend to our readers?

A I'm always going to have those passions, though not necessarily in that order. The Cardinals were just here and I declared a national holiday, but apparently Congress and the President have to approve those so nothing happened. We went out to see them. They lost three games out of four. I haven't had time to get to the race track, alas.

Q The names of your sons --North, Nash and Dodge -- are unusual. Why are they named that?

A Two cars and one direction. Like many people in those days, my father didn't have a middle name. But he often had to have one so he took North in honor of Alfred North Whitehead, the British philosopher. My wife noticed the name Nash in a Rita Mae Brown novel and liked it. As for Dodge, there's no more American name than that: Dodge City and the car. I like one syllable, macho names.